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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an ethnographic exploration of the teaching style and methods of a junior high physical education instructor serving predominantly African American students in an economically disadvantaged Chicago, Illinois neighborhood. Prior to her reassignment, the instructor in question was exceptionally popular among students, despite a reputation as a strict authoritarian. Examples of classroom events and dialogue are used to illustrate the teacher's role as disciplinarian, as caring adult, and as friend to students. It is found that strict discipline was the teacher's primary means of expressing her caring for and devotion to her students. While her classroom behavior was reported to be rarely friendly or affectionate, students found her to be warm and approachable when encountered outside the gym. It is argued that while the teacher's emphasis on authority and regimentation over student empowerment and expression went against many currently popular models of classroom management, the importance of discipline in her curriculum was well appreciated by students and others in the community. Viewing her teaching methods within the context of a culture and community which provide students with relatively few lessons and models in self-control and discipline, her pedagogical methods when seen situationally are found to be both valid and effective. (Contains 16 references.) (PB)

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RECONCILING THE MORAL AND TECHNICAL DIMENSIONS OF TEACHING: MOVING BEYOND NOTIONS OF GOOD AND BAD PEDAGOGY

ED 384 598

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA., April 1995

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The character of gym class

> The eighth grade class' arrival in the hallway outside the gym for its weekly physical education lesson marks the beginning of the ritual that characterizes every gym class: The boys and girls stand in two separate lines. The diminutive physical education teacher, Mrs. Tracer, stands straight-faced just outside the gym door. The students smile and joke to each other -- they are excited about the prospect of gym class and happy to see Mrs. Tracer. When Mrs. Tracer invites the students into the gym, almost automatically the line of girls enters the gym first, followed by the boys. Some of the girls pause as they walk by Mrs. Tracer and brush against her playfully.
>
> The students congregate along one side of the gym and talk among themselves while removing their top garments to reveal shorts and T-shirts. They put their clothes on benches and then sit on the black perimeter line of the basketball court. Meanwhile Mrs. Tracer becomes impatient. "We gotta get started," she shouts as she walks down the line of students.
>
> Mrs. Tracer notices a boy chewing gum. "Throw the gum away and sit down," she shouts. He leaves the gym to search for a waste bin. Noticing that one girl is still not changed, Mrs. Tracer says firmly, "Terri, get those pants off!"
>
> "It's good to be in gym, we get to have fun!" a girl tells me. "We can express ourselves!" says another.

This scene takes place at Fleming School, an elementary school serving approximately 600 students in Walton, an African-American neighborhood on Chicago's south-side. The students are all Black and 97% of them come from low-income families. The children at Fleming live in an area which is fraught with gang activity, and during one month there were 74 homicides within three miles of the school, a record for Chicago (Chicago Police Department, 1992). Life on the streets is dangerous and violent, and it is not uncommon for marked and unmarked police cars to patrol the area and for drug busts to be conducted within yards of the school.

From 1990-94 I was a research assistant at Fleming School for a school-university collaboration project, and assisted in the physical education department, taught a before-school

soccer program, and worked with classroom teachers in their classrooms. At Fleming School, physical education is generally perceived by students as a break from the classroom and a chance to unwind. As a former physical education teacher, I was curious why the gym was considered a worthwhile place and why the physical education teacher's practice was highly valued in the context of the school. A return to the scene in the Fleming gym will help the reader obtain a sense of what goes on in lessons and serve as a basis for an elaboration of research questions and methodology.

> Mrs. Tracer stands in front of the students as they complete their changing and continue their conversations.
>
> "You sound like the fifth graders," she says frowning at them. The noise level immediately lowers. Then Mrs. Tracer shouts, "Squads!" and the students stand up, walk quickly to one end of the gym, and stand in four lines. On the command, "Sit!" they sink to the floor and sit with their legs crossed and begin to talk among themselves. Several students notice that Mrs. Tracer is preparing to take roll, and say loudly, "Sch!" and the others immediately are quiet.
>
> The students sit patiently in their lines while Mrs. Tracer takes role. When this is complete, Mrs. Tracer shouts "Circle!" and the students jump up and quickly take their places around the perimeter of the large red circle in the center of the gym. The circle is not large enough to accommodate all the students, so Mrs. Tracer tells five girls to move to the smaller inner circle in order to reduce the crowding. "Space yourselves," Mrs. Tracer shouts, "I want a boy next to a girl. Ladies move over to let a boy in." Freddie, a tall bespectacled boy, tells other students to move to specific places, and there is smiling and good-natured teasing among the students for a few seconds as they get organized according to Mrs. Tracer's instructions. For example, one girl puts her arms out and touches the arms of the boys next to her. They react by giving her a small push before being told to "Stop!" by Mrs. Tracer.
>
> Mrs. Tracer plays a version of Michael Jackson's "Beat It" on a tape recorder. A voice on the tape provides directions to an aerobics routine which the students follow by performing stretching movements to the music. Mrs. Tracer leads the exercises from the inner circle.
>
> Many of the students talk and joke with each other while performing the routine. This exuberance begins to drown out the directions on the tape and Mrs. Tracer stops the activity and shouts, "We will do this the whole period, I don't care." The students' frivolity immediately ends and during the second attempt at the routine

they pay close attention to the directions. The climax of the routine involves sit-ups and leg raises and many students are catching their breath by the time it ends. There are some moans and groans but also many smiles as they return to their squads.

This lesson marks the first week of a soccer unit and the students know that they will have to practice skills before they play inter-squad games in the subsequent weeks. After a brief explanation by Mrs. Tracer, students take turns to dribble the ball around a chair, next they perform a side foot pass, a trap, and finally a headed pass. The students complete these drills with almost silent precision.

In the subsequent weeks the students play inter-squad games during which there is a great deal of noise, activity, enthusiasm, and excitement. Spectators sit on the benches completely absorbed in the action and when the ball comes in their direction they lift their feet so as not to interfere with the game. The constantly changing substitutes sit with Mrs. Tracer on the opposite side of the gym, and two boys hold the goals because they are rather unstable. Cries of "Go get it, Trace!" and "Kick it, kick it!" can be heard as legs fly in all directions. The students laugh as a girl writhes in mock pain as the ball is kicked against her legs. When goals are scored, Mrs. Tracer raises her fist in the air and shares in the excitement and jubilation of the students.

In the final week of the soccer unit, after the completion of inter-squad games, the winning squads from each of the seventh and eighth grade classes play off in a championship game. The students who are not in these squads sit along each side of the gym talking quietly and wait for the game to begin. The players are very excited about the prospect of competing in the championship game, and one boy brags, "We gonna take it!" to which a fellow student replies, "Oh yeah, we'll see!" Mrs..Tracer strides purposefully around the gym organizing the spectators and then walks to the middle of the gym and says in a serious voice, "When you quiet, we'll get started."

As referee of the game, Mrs. Tracer takes her job very seriously. During the early stages, she doesn't smile but gradually becomes more relaxed and laughs and jokes with students, especially when she has to move quickly away from the path of the ball. Like the spectators she becomes emotionally involved in the action and jumps up when a near-miss occurs or when a goal is scored.

The students expend a large amount of effort during the game which is physical although never violent. The collisions that occur are caused by the students' clumsiness rather than intention, and the intensity of play is exemplified when one student loses his shoe but persists in kicking the ball before putting his shoe back on. The students are very good natured; there is no retaliation or poor sportspersonship, and on one occasion when a girl is pushed over by a boy, both laugh and joke with each other and then get straight back into the game.

> Although the spectators sit along the edge of the gym, they do not interfere with the ball but duck, jump, or step out of the way. All watch intently and clap and cheer when shots are successful or saved. When the game ends, Mrs. Tracer orders the players to sit down and directs the students in the audience to return to their classrooms.

The emergence of research questions and a methodology

This sequence of events is typical of the physical education classes at Fleming School. My initial curiosity was sparked by the realization that the elements of physical education that I considered essential were missing from the curriculum: there was little evidence of mastery of a progression of skills, few motor play activities, few opportunities for students to cooperate and problem solve, and no activities that enabled students to learn about fitness and planning their own fitness programs. Mrs. Tracer's practice did not conform to my beliefs about physical education teaching, and her actions and those of her students were very different from anything I had previously experienced.

During three years as an assistant in Mrs. Tracer's gym, I was often shocked, surprised, and troubled by what I was seeing (Cutforth, in press). Mrs. Tracer appeared to talk to her students in a negative manner. She seldom prefaced her directions with "Please," or "Let's," or "Would you?" Instead she said, "Shut up," "Shut your mouth," "Throw your gum away." The students seemed to expect to be told what to do and did not question anything. Mrs. Tracer did not consult them when making decisions about class time and space, nor explain the basis for her decisions. The games required little learning, conditioning, or practice. The only preparation necessary was to go over the rules. Mrs. Tracer did not change the rules of games to accommodate the varied skill levels, nor did she incorporate skill tests, cognitive tests, or improvement in her grading practices. There was

little evidence that she had remained up to date with current trends or critically reflected upon what she was doing. Taken as a whole, the events in the gym were certainly far removed from the professional ideals concerning effective teaching methods and learning outcomes espoused in the most current teacher-education programs, curriculum guides, and professional journals.

However, early in my second year at Fleming, in October, 1991, I began to realize that Mrs. Tracer and her program were having an impact in the school that transcended what seemed on the surface to be occurring in the gymnasium, and this realization provided the basis for my research. On my arrival at the school one morning I was informed that due to a central office staffing decision, Mrs. Tracer had been "bumped" out of her position as physical education teacher. Apparently, a teacher with more seniority in the district was entitled to a teaching position and due to her limited status Mrs. Tracer would have to relinquish her's. The mood among many of the faculty was somber and several students were both upset and angry. "We love Mrs. Tracer, how could they do this to us?" said an eighth grader. A second grade girl asked me to sign her petition demanding Mrs. Tracer's reinstatement as gym teacher, and assured me that her mother would take her to the district office so she could deliver the petition to the superintendent. I spent the morning talking to teachers and students about the situation. A common sentiment expressed by the teachers was that Mrs. Tracer was going to be missed. Their comments included, "She had established a strong gym program," "She made those kids really work in that gym," "Who would run the annual gym show?" "What about the cheerleaders?" "What are certain students going to do without her presence in the school?"

I asked the students how they perceived Mrs. Tracer and her program. Their comments included: "She is strict," "She makes you work," "You have to wear a gym uniform," "You know where you stand with Miss Tracer," "She is a mean gym teacher." Even the principal admitted that while there was nothing he could do to get her reinstated, he would extend little more than minimal assistance to the new gym teacher. "She will be missed in the gym," he told me, but he managed to keep her in the school by finding a place for her as a fifth grade teacher. In actuality, the new physical education teacher resigned after three weeks. Several teachers and students told me that he had some problems with class control, although I never observed him teaching apart from through a balcony window. Mrs. Tracer was immediately reassigned to her position as gym teacher -- a situation which seemed to meet with everyone's approval.

The sequence of events surrounding Mrs. Tracer's exit from and return to the gymnasium led me to acknowledge that my views about her teaching and program had been framed by my own perspectives on physical education. Clearly the people with whom I had spoken believed that Mrs. Tracer was a very effective teacher, and I felt that to better understand the events and actions in the gymnasium and the overall place of physical education in the school, I had to give credence to their perspectives. This meant looking at her practice in a different way, and broadening my perspective from my own interpretation of physical education to the consideration of others'.

My initial interest in the practice of Mrs. Tracer, had developed into a research enterprise (Cutforth, 1994) and for three full days each week throughout the 1992-93 school year, I systematically observed 84 physical education lessons and conducted 33 interviews

with Mrs. Tracer, her students and former students, classroom teachers, administrators, and parents. My research was guided by three questions: How is the physical education program structured and why? How do people in the school view physical education? What are the connections between features of everyday processes and interactions in the gymnasium -- particularly those concerning the moral authority of the teacher -- and wider forces emanating from inside and outside the school?

My "participant" role in Mrs. Tracer's gymnasium was never more than as a teaching assistant, and my presence in her gym did not change her approach either to subject matter or her students. On occasions, I helped explain drills, demonstrated skills, and organized teams but always on her request and under her direction. Although in performing these tasks I became a "participating" observer, I never disregarded my researcher role, and during breaks in the action spoke into a mini tape recorder or entered key words and short notes into my notebook which later I developed into a longer more coherent description. On the many occasions when the students were involved in competitive or recreational games, Mrs. Tracer did not require my assistance and I withdrew literally to the role of a mere observer of physical education lessons and remained largely unobtrusive. In physical education classes, perhaps more than in other subject areas, there are countless opportunities for the researcher to be a "general dogsbody" by performing such tasks as collecting and handing out equipment, keeping score, running errands, and attending to minor injuries. I found that "being around" the Fleming gym on a consistent and long term basis (Willis, 1977) provided me with many valuable opportunities to pursue my role as ethnographer.

In the ensuing weeks, the students became so used to my visits that they took my presence in stride. I often spoke informally with them either before or after class, in hallways, in the lunchroom, or on the playground. My ongoing work with the collaboration project enhanced my visibility in the school, and students, teachers, and parents tended to relate to me more as a teacher and not as somebody doing research, but occasionally individual teachers and students would ask me how my research was progressing. Often Mrs. Tracer and I conversed informally during lessons, during breaks between lessons and before school, at lunch time and after school, and these moments proved to be sources of valuable data. She freely shared her views about teaching, the actions of students, and incidents in lessons, and seemed to understand that I was not there to evaluate her, nor to offer her counsel how to teach. I believe that this had something to do with our emerging understanding and rapport as well as mutual respect (Glesne, 1989).

I conducted interviews either during class time or after school depending on the particular child or adult being interviewed. The purpose was to generate discussion of the perspectives and values about physical education that the participants brought to bear and the basis for these; how the perspectives related to what was occurring in the gymnasium; and how what was occurring in the gymnasium related to the notion of a good teacher in this particular setting.

As I undertook this research, the subtlety of what I was observing became clear to me, and this realization generated more questions than answers. I no longer assigned events along a scale of good and bad because they were too complicated, too interwoven into the particulars of Mrs. Tracer's gymnasium. As I reflected upon what I was seeing, hearing, and

feeling I realized that my preconceptions had prevented me from seeing the less visible aspects of classroom life and the many qualities in Mrs. Tracer's teaching and her program. I moved away from adopting a judgmental stance concerning effective and ineffective teaching practices to a more sympathetic and accepting understanding of teaching as a moral enterprise which takes full account of the situation. As a result I now have a more encompassing view of Mrs. Tracer's practice than I had at the start.

EFFECTIVE TEACHING IN CONTEXT

Mrs. Tracer's image as an effective teacher is grounded in three features of her practice: teacher as disciplinarian, teacher as carer, and teacher as friend. Together these human qualities and characteristics form a social and moral composite of a teacher that contributes to a personal, caring relationship between Mrs. Tracer and her students. These almost contradictory sides of her character, which all students encounter, render her a very real person, a role model who models the complexity of being human as well as many important moral traits.

Teacher as Disciplinarian

The students' compliance with the gym routine outlined earlier means that Mrs. Tracer has few serious discipline problems and lessons run smoothly. From the time the students enter the gym, they know that they have more freedom than they experience in the classroom, but are mindful that there are limits to how far they can go. Mrs. Cooper, a sixth grade teacher says, "In the gymnasium Mrs. Tracer is the complete authoritarian and most of the

students know where she's coming from all the time, that's why they react to her the way they do."

Through her disciplinary style, Mrs. Tracer establishes a predictable world, a familiar world, a world with certainty. Mr. Miller, a parent says, "The kids soon realize what Mrs. Tracer is about. They know what she will and will not tolerate and [the gym] becomes a smooth sailing ship." Robert, an eighth grader says, "If she didn't have that control, then they'd think they could run over her," while his classmate David says, "When you graduate you might say this teacher had this structure since I've been here. She had this thing for me that kept me goin', that kept me doin' good in school."

There are occasions, however, when the behavior of individual or several students in a class provokes Mrs. Tracer into her role as a disciplinarian. In the next vignette, we see Mrs. Tracer reprimanding the eighth grade class. This is the second gym class of the school year for this class and the students have just entered the gym and are getting dressed:

> Mrs. Tracer walks down the line of students, and says to a student chewing gum, "Chewing? An F. Didn't I say that if you chew even your finger nails then it's an F?" She notices that 12 boys and four girls are not dressed, shakes her head and says, "This is pitiful. Do you believe this? They come in here not dressed, like I was playin'." The offending students still dressed in jeans and T-shirts sit cross-legged in a line on the floor and lower their heads as they listen to Mrs. Tracer's comment. The rest of the students talk quietly to each other as they change into their gym clothes and eventually join their peers on the black line.
>
> On the command, "Squads" the students move to the end of the gym and stand in their squad lines. Mrs. Tracer warns them that they will not be allowed to take part in after-school activities if their poor attitude continues. She says, "I'm going to stop you before you get started. There will be no basketball, soccer, cheerleading, pompons, music -- not any activity if you can't act right. I'm not playing. You will not participate in nothing." After a lengthy pause she says firmly, "Sit!"

As Mrs. Tracer takes roll, some students have their heads propped up in their hands, others have their heads cocked to one side. She notices a boy who has leaned back from an upright position and says,

> Sit up! You're not tired 'cause you haven't done anything, and you won't be doing anything. You all thought I was playin' about gym uniforms. You want to try me? You will be going back to the classroom to sit. [pause] No that's too easy. We'll walk up and down stairs round the school, up and down.

Some of the students cough at this uneasily. One of the boys says, "I've got shorts." [He had come dressed under his pants and hadn't taken them off.]

"Too late," Mrs. Tracer says, "you are trying my intelligence. You still an F."

Another boy becomes restless and talks to a fellow student in his squad. Mrs. Tracer shouts, "Stop it, sit up boy!" and he immediately obeys her. She continues:

> I don't want to hear, "My mother didn't wash my gym shirt." You old enough to wash your own. That is what soap and water is for.

After pausing, Mrs. Tracer changes the subject:

> You would have played the first game next week. Now you may not play at all. You are trying to be grown and don't know how. I'm going to have a good year, you can suffer all you want, I don't care. Eighth grade will be your worse year, and you'll never forget it. In the future you'll always remember that short gym teacher who made you sit because you didn't know how to act. I'm preparing you for high school. They don't care, they tell you "You can't come in here, you're late, I don't care." Then you have to find somewhere to go on the street until next period.

After pausing for a few seconds, she continues,

> There are a lot of dropouts on the street. You know them. They say, "We have late class." They lying through their teeth. The police come by and pick you up. They don't baby you like we do. You're just another number. You make a name for yourself otherwise nobody will know you.

At this point, a parent enters the gym and Mrs. Tracer turns briefly towards her before continuing to talk to the eighth graders: "You got to set an example. How can the younger children look up to you? You can't be yourself, let alone be somebody. You're the oldest people in school."

She returns to the subject of her past.

> When I was in grammar school there was a graduating class of 300. There ain't even a hundred in your class. Now there are more people dropping out than people in school. Your parents let you do what you want to do. [They say] "OK stay at home." [pause] When I hit the door, my kids hit the door. I

> drop them off [at school], I pick them up. They better be there. My son is ten years old, he has seven assignments a night. I feel sorry for him, but I don't 'cause it has to be done. He doesn't watch TV in the week, too much work. He has read more books than some of you. He dresses for every gym class, my daughter too. The night before gym he gets all his stuff ready. [The students laugh]. I am proud of him. His test scores are at [the level of] 12 or 13 year-olds and he only fifth grade. Where you at? [pause] They passing you through, you too old to sit [stay in your grade]. They put you out because of your age at high school. You dead weight. I push them [her kids], I don't want them to be nobody, there are too many nobodies out there. [The students clap vigorously].

At this point, Miss Sands, the eighth grade teacher, enters the gym to collect her students for lunch. Mrs. Tracer remains standing in front of the students and shouts across the gym,

> "Another F, the whole class. I'm going to stop them now before they get started. I told them no activities after school. They must learn how to act like eighth graders, they don't respect themselves or anyone else."

Mrs. Tracer tells those who are not dressed to stand up and then to line up by the door. Fourteen students remain in their squads, and for a moment they talk to each other. "I didn't tell you could talk!" Mrs. Tracer says sternly before telling them to get dressed.

In this episode, we see Mrs. Tracer enforcing her gym rules ("Didn't I say that if you chew ... it's an F?") in the face of what she regards as either a lack of respect or open resistance by students ("They come in here not dressed like I was playin'"). Her manner towards the whole class is, on the surface, entirely negative, and the comment, "You would have played the first game next week, now you may not play at all," refers to the power to withhold what they most enjoy. She states her superiority as an adult ("You are trying to be grown and don't know how") and also remains detached from any personal hurt involved in the students' failure to conform to her rules ("I'm going to have a good year, you can suffer all you want, I don't care").

Her comment "... you'll always remember that short gym teacher who made you sit because you didn't know how to act," is a reminder to the students of her image as a disciplinarian, and demonstrates her willingness to use such tactics to ensure student obedience in the future. When the homeroom teacher arrives to collect her students, Mrs. Tracer flaunts her authority again by saying, "I'm going to stop them now before they get started."

Mrs. Tracer's statement, "I'm preparing you for high school," signifies a shift in her method by relating her approach to the students' future and the importance of self-discipline in the light of a large impersonal high school system ("They don't care..."), the attraction of the street ("There are a lot of dropouts on the street. You know them"), and dysfunctional family lives ("Your parents let you do what you wanna do"). While she recognizes the peer group pressures, family responsibilities, and social problems which contribute to many of the students' low aspirations, she refuses to accept that they must remain victims of their circumstances. Rather, she demands self-responsibility and a future orientation from her students and believes that it is her job to teach these values conventionally labelled "middle class" (Bredemeier, 1988).

While she recognizes that many students' family lives are unstable, she believes that this does not give them an excuse to be irresponsible. Her view that one has control over one's own destiny is evident when she tells the students about her role as a mother ("When I hit the door, my kids hit the door") and then provokes the students to look at their lives by saying, "[My son] has read more books than some of you... His test scores are at [the level of] 12 or 13 year-olds and he only fifth grade. Where you at?" Her concluding comment, "I don't want them to be nobody, there are too many nobodies out there," brings out rapturous

applause from the students. Her words challenge the students to look at their lives in a different way, and are an attempt to provoke them to consider an alternative way of conducting themselves. Their reaction suggests that they are not disturbed by their teacher's criticism of them and perhaps they do not even hear it as belittling them. Rather, they are appreciative of and impressed both by her tough-mindedness and the sincere emotion with which she castigates them; perhaps they have grasped her message that they are responsible for their own success or failure, that they are not going to be coddled, and that they will be judged by their actions.

In this episode, Mrs. Tracer maintains the initiative as the authority figure in the face of the students being disrespectful or testing her limits. In an interview, David, an eighth grader told me, "The reason she holler a lot is because of the things the [students] do. They [think] 'She ain't gonna stop us from havin' gym 'cause we ain't dressed,' and all that stuff." Candice, an eighth grader comments about the episode involving her class: "We was out of hand, if you obey her then you'll get gym." Mrs. Tracer's view of authority is closely allied with the notion of control. She says,

> First you got to find out why you there and what am I here for and what am I goin' to do with these children who are lost and do not understand. Am I goin' to let them run me, or am I goin' to run them? These are children: who's grown here, me or you? Who's runnin' this show, me or you?

People in the school have their views about Mrs. Tracer's discipline style. The students believe that her approach prevents them from misbehaving. In the following section students speak about her with a combination of fear and respect. First, Ben and Earnest, two second grade boys, talk about what they learn when Mrs. Tracer "gets mad:"

Ben: [Mrs. Tracer is] a fun teacher and she teach us a lot and you learn about stuff.

Earnest: Yeah, but if you be bad, if you interrupt her when she teachin' you somethin' then she'll get real mad, she'll make you sit out.

Ben: And holler at you.

Nick: Is it OK for her to do that?

Earnest: No 'cause you don't have any fun, you just sit down watchin', you don't have any fun.

Nick: Do the kids learn from that?

Ben: Yes they learn a lot.

Earnest: They learn not to be talkin' over her.

Brian and Sherell, two fifth grade boys, talk about Mrs. Tracer's discipline style:

Nick: Why do you think she runs the class the way she does?

Brian: She a discipliner.

Nick: Discipliner, what do you mean by that?

Brian: I mean that if you keep on talkin' she just goin' to stand there waitin' for you, then if somebody act bad she gonna scream at you. That's what I mean by disciplining.

Nick: Is that OK?

Brian: Yeah.

Sherell: She can run it anyway she want to because it's her gym.

Brian: She can keep you there all day if she wants. My mother always said, "Respect your teachers like you respect your mother or your father."

Nick: You said she shouts a lot. Is she strict?

Brian: Yeah.

Sherell: She's tryin' to keep us under control so we won't be bad, hollerin' and screamin' and wild, and then when we play hockey we be all hittin' people in the head, and hollerin' and belleyin'.

Nick: So what does Miss Tracer gets you to do in gym?

Sherell: To respect her...

Brian: And not to be actin' bad or nuthin'.

Nick: She makes you do that?

Brian: Uh-uh [No]. She don't make you do it, she makes you not do it.

Sherell: See how you behave.

Brian: Yeah, that's what gym's all about. If a teacher screams at you and you talk back to her or you mock her then that's actin' bad, but if you have a real strict gym teacher, then they goin' to stop all that stuff.

Other people believe that her approach is based upon her knowledge of what the students need. Mr. Hopkins, the assistant principal says,

> The type of language that Mrs. Tracer uses with her kids is based upon who the kids are. Students in this school need the kind of discipline that she insists upon, and they crave that sort of discipline. She knows the kids and what it takes. She knows what will and what will not work.

Mr. Owens, the principal, believes that Mrs. Tracer's approach conforms to parents and students' expectations that teachers should be strong disciplinarians if they are to be effective. He says, "Some people may be surprised to know that kids want structure and they want discipline, and if you don't give it to them they'll run you over." His assertion is confirmed in the following conversation in which Robert and David, two eighth graders, recount what happened when Mrs. Tracer was temporarily removed from the gym to make way for a male physical education teacher in the district who had more seniority. This teacher lasted three weeks before asking to be reassigned:

Nick:	You had that other gym teacher right?
Robert:	Yeah, they ran over him.
David:	The three weeks he was there, I came [to gym], got dressed and played basketball. He tried to stop me. That was one of the things that he weren't able to do that Miss Tracer was able to do.
Robert:	He wanted to stop the noise.
David:	And I told him, "What you need is some control over us."
Nick:	You told him that? [laughs]
David:	Um hum [yes]. 'Cause he didn't have none.
Nick:	So control is something that you really value?
Robert:	I think a gym teacher should have [control].
Nick:	A gym teacher or all teachers?
Robert:	Any teachers.

The sense of order that characterizes Mrs. Tracer's gym is elaborated upon by both former and present students:

> They think that by her bein' short they can run her over. But she showed them, can't nobody run her over. (Elizabeth, a former student).

> She can holler a lot but you will learn, she only holler at you to push you because [if] she don't holler we just [be] like, "Well forget it, she ain't holler, she ain't tell us to

> do it, forget it, we ain't gotta do it." But [when] she holler that make us do it more to be perfect. (Sofia, a former student).
>
> I didn't really talk back to her. If I did she be like, "Don't holler at me, I'm an adult," so I shut up right away because she was so loud so I did it no more. I ain't even gonna try it." (Juanita, eighth grade student).

The principal believes that parents' expectations also focus on notions of control and particularly teachers doing "either what they're doing at home, or maybe what they are not able to do at home." Mr. Thompson, a parent, exemplifies these sentiments saying,

> If they don't get [discipline] at home they need someone that would discipline them to make them learn, steer them the right way. Teachers should be disciplinarians because if you let a child run wild he's gonna be like that his whole life, and he's not gonna let nobody say nothin' to him. And that's not gonna help him to grow up and make somethin' out of himself.

Mrs. Tracer's approach corresponds to parents' expectations about how teachers should provide a disciplined environment for their children. They expect her to eradicate and remediate undesirable traits in their children and to instill attitudes, values, and interests in them. The following comments show that parents trust her and approve of her methods; they also suggest that they believe that she has a profound influence on their children (Jackson, 1986):

> The average person would let [Mrs. Tracer] be strict with their kids if they want them to have any type of self-respect or respect for others. (Mr. Winfrey, a parent).
>
> I have seen Miss Tracer take kids that were rowdy, they didn't have respect, they didn't have that self-esteem, and turn them around. It was like taking a pancake and flipping it over. (Mr. Miller, a parent).

Mrs. Tracer's reputation comes not so much from her role as a subject specialist but from her reputation as a disciplinarian and she believes that discipline needs to be in place before teaching can begin. Her ritualistic teaching style is both distinctive and popular and

she is amused when on occasions students impersonate her. By doing this, they not only show that they recognize her image as a strict teacher, but also as someone whose methods have the desired effects. She says,

> They mark me and try to impersonate me, they try to do as I do it; I like that. You become a leader. Some of them get up there and say, "Alright, I'm Miss Tracer today." [laughs]. They take my personality on, and they can do it. You'd be surprised.

Teacher as Carer

During my observations, there were literally hundreds of incidences of Mrs. Tracer in the role of disciplinarian, but very few instances of her telling the students that she cared about them. However, she shows that she cares about her students through her strong disciplinary structure. As a former student says, "Most kids knew that she was just hollerin' just to be hollerin'. She care about mostly everybody."

Students who come from home backgrounds which are unsettled and neglectful may actually relish her strict approach. As Mrs. Murray, a parent says, "[Some parents] don't give that warm home feelin' to their kids, and their kids come to school wants to be hollered at, they just lookin' for that attention." Miss Smith, a seventh grade teacher, also believes that to a certain extent, students who do not receive much discipline at home welcome the discipline that they receive in the gym. She says,

> Students [who] don't see structure or discipline in other areas [of their lives] are not used to it so they seem upset with [Mrs. Tracer] because she's so disciplined with them but they like it and they need it. They kind of fall into her trap, so to speak [laughs]. She has them mesmerized because she's giving them something that they're not used to seeing. It's a kind of love-hate relationship. They like having structure but they like to rebel against it too.

In the following comments a parent and two teachers refer to this relationship between discipline and caring. Mr. Miller, a parent says, "She has that authority presentation to the kids as well as the caring and compassionate side of her." Miss Gilmore, a first grade teacher, believes that Mrs. Tracer's approach as a disciplinarian is interpreted by students as caring for them. She says,

> The firmness is definitely associated with "that person cares about me" 'cause there are a lot of neglectful parents who don't give them that attention at home. They can do anything they want and go anywhere they want [and] they view that attention as [meaning] that someone cares about them.

Mrs. Samuels, a second grade teacher, also links the disciplinarian function (which she calls being mean) with caring. She says,

> Children have a way of knowing whether someone is just being mean to them or whether they are being mean and tough but that person cares about them. She lets them know in many subtle ways that I care about you. She's done things above and beyond what is required of her in that gym and when the kids know that this is somebody that I can come and talk to and who's going to be there for me, they don't mind the toughness so much.

As paradoxical as it may at first glance seem, Mrs. Tracer's consistently strict disciplinary style embodies a palpable undercurrent of caring (Riessman, 1976). Moreover, she also shows that she cares by giving advice to students about a range of matters, including the dangers of involvement in crime and in gangs, and on sexual relations. In the next vignette, we witness how Mrs. Tracer confronts boys whom she suspects of being on the fringes of gangs; boys who, because of their age and vulnerability, are in danger of losing their direction and ultimately, perhaps, their lives to the public recognition and identity that gang membership and a criminal life-style can provide (Bing, 1991). On this occasion her

tone of voice and somber mood reflects the seriousness with which she views this matter and her belief that these boys should not get caught up in the racket.

> While students play in a hockey game, Mrs. Tracer returns to the side of the gym where two boys sit rather self-consciously and subdued. She stands next to them while watching the game and blows her whistle when infringements occur or goals are scored. Although the game is very intense and the spectators cheer and clap, Mrs. Tracer continues her inquisition: "Who else [is involved]?" She adds, "You want to destroy yourself? They ain't nothin', you somebody."
>
> When the period ends, Mrs. Tracer walks over to them, tells them to get dressed and says sternly, "I don't want see you standing on no corner, I don't want to see you getting caught in no crossfire. You never know when they are going to shoot."
>
> Minutes later in the Art Room Mrs. Tracer eats her lunch with several other teachers. Suddenly a lady enters the room and introduces herself to Mrs. Tracer as the mother of Michael, one of the boys whom moments earlier she had been questioning in the gym. Although probably in her early 30's the lady's face is worn and worried, and she looks considerably older. "Please look out for my boy," she pleads desperately with Mrs. Tracer, "I only see him so much at home, you see him during the day. Please tell me what is going on." Mrs. Tracer assures her that she will stay on top of the situation, and after the lady leaves the room, tells me that the lady's son is a good boy and that she likes him.
>
> Although Mrs. Tracer admits to liking Michael, one would not think so from the way she interrogates him after lunch. The boy who is usually quite assured, now becomes frail and awkward, and keeps his eyes lowered. The barrage of questions hurled at him by Mrs. Tracer reveals several ambiguities in his story, and after realizing that he has contradicted himself he dissolves into tears and admits that he is the leader of a group which he insists on calling a club.

In this episode, Mrs. Tracer gives her full energy and modulates her tone and style depending on the situation. She is an empathetic parent with the distressed mother, and is a confrontational and probing interrogator with the boys. Here, she explains her rationale for taking this approach:

> Sometimes you have to say, "Time out, somethin' serious is goin' on here, and it needs to be dealt with right now before it gets totally out of control." You have to sit down and say, "Hey, we are goin' to have to rap some, you wanna talk, is there

> somethin' on your mind that you need to talk to somebody about? We can talk because there might be somebody else havin' the same problem or somethin' very similar, and we have to deal with it right now." It's like a rap session, counselling type thing.

In addition to addressing student involvement in gangs, Mrs. Tracer also gives students advice about the dangers of sexual activity, about problems at home, and attitude in school. Elizabeth, a former student says,

> She used to tell us, "If you are out there messin' around try to be protected with [contraception]," but if you come out with a baby, she not gonna be on your case talkin' about [how] you're a young bitch. Miss Tracer be by your side, and she'll tell us, "Don't be outside late 'cause this is gonna happen, and these drugs." She will talk to you well.

Mr. Miller, a parent says,

> They look up to her, she's a mother image to kids who can't relate their mother at home. She can talk to boys and girls and she has a lot of respect for these kids. As long as they show her respect, she gives it right back. They show her love, she gives their love right back.

In the following conversation Sofia, a former student, describes Mrs. Tracer's perceptive qualities and her expertise in giving advice to students:

Sofia:	If we had a problem, Miss Tracer sit down and talk to you. Miss Tracer knew because she know when something was wrong with you.
Nick:	How did she know?
Sofia:	'Cause most of these kids that were eighth grade with me was all happy, we were outgoing. And if there would be something wrong she would just look at me, like what's wrong with me. She could spot us and look and then know something wrong.
Nick:	Was she able to help you?
Sofia:	Yeah, she give us all types of advice, about growing up, about boys. To me she was more like a big sister or a second mom. When I couldn't go to my mom, I could go to Miss Tracer.
Nick:	And the advice she gave you was good?
Sofia:	Yeah, real good.
Nick:	Can you remember anything in particular?
Sofia:	When I was going here I was really bad for a while and she told me when I was going to high school a lot of stuff gonna change. She was

like, if I put my mind to what I wanna do, I will do it. When I got to high school I was like, "I wanna major in medicine," and then once I settled down I looked at the work and see what I wanted to do, I did it. All she told me was, "Just settle down, Sofia, you can do it." And I put my mind to it and I did it. I'm doing perfectly in school.

Nick: How come Miss Tracer understands you so well?

Sofia: She's an adult but when she talk to us, I guess she clear her mind. She don't act like an adult, she talk herself into like she was my age, when I was fourteen, fifteen, she talk herself into a fifteen person. And she would tell us about the experiences she went through and then she would talk herself back into an adult again and give us the advice that an adult would give us. She lead us through a nice way.

Sofia incorporates a remarkably pertinent description of the nature of empathy as she expresses her belief that Mrs. Tracer has contributed to her emerging feelings of self-esteem and her hopes of moving out of Walton and ghetto life. David, an eighth grade student, provides this perspective of Mrs. Tracer's caring nature:

> She tryin' to make them a better person by makin' them do some things that right [rather] than wrong. You can go to her for anythin' you need and she'll be there to help you. She [is] one of those teachers who wanna help.

Mrs. Tracer also incorporates her knowledge of the community and street life in her dealings with students. A parent comments,

> She got that street sense even though she's not that much from the street. She know when they tryin' to throw that street stuff on her 'cause she can read it. A lot of them [the students] got that street sense and not that book sense and when they throw that street sense on her, she can get them because she got a little bit in her too.

Mrs. Tracer's obtains her knowledge of events outside school through discussions with individual parents, students, former students, and colleagues. She admits to finding herself thinking back to her own childhood [explain] "to understand why the kids are goin' through some of these things." Several parents use the word "relate" when describing Mrs. Tracer's ability to connect with and listen to students. Former students recognize her knowledge of the

community and experience of life in general. For example, Elizabeth says, "She been through a little of bit of what we've been through, and she know more about the outside life [on the streets] than we do and she tell us which way to go." Sofia says, "She always kept up with everythin' that went on inside and outside [school]. I don't know where she get it from but she always did."

Clearly, the students appreciate teachers who take the time to interact with them at a more personal level, and their accounts support the findings and views of Alexander and Miller (1989), Delpit (1988), Foster (1993), and King (1993) who believe that African-American teachers often represent surrogate parent figures, disciplinarians, counselors, role models, and advocates. These roles are particularly important in the lives of children from poor communities such as Walton because of the threatened state of the community and the emphasis placed on education as a survival mechanism and the principal means of advancement. Indeed, a common sentiment was that "Most teachers don't sit down and talk to you and care for you the way Miss Tracer do." Mrs. Roberts, a parent, says, "It's a matter of listening. A child appreciates it when you listen to 'em, especially if they have somethin' that's not so good to tell you. They appreciate you more." Another parent says, "They [the students] like Mrs. Tracer more 'cause she's little and they feel like she's closer to them than a teacher... It's not just, 'You do this and you do that.' She puts her heart into it and she let them know that she really cares about them, 'cause they take their time and they talks to her." Sofia says,

> [Miss Tracer] is a nice woman. She will sit down and talk to you. You give her your respect and she will give you respect. Treat her like an adult, don't treat her like one of those friends on the streets. You give her respect she will care for you as well as she care for her own kids.

Thus Mrs. Tracer's image as a caring teacher is closely bound up with her ability to relate and listen to the students and to identify with and understand the situations that face them. She believes that the students "see me as more than a teacher 'cause I relate better." Her view of her teaching approach is contained in the following comment:

> There's a time to work and a time to play. As long as they know that you are there if they have a problem. You have to let them know that you've been there, [that] I was a child just like you. Sometimes you have to let them know that you have children too, and that you go through some of the things with your children at home that you are goin' through with them. Sometimes you have to ask, "Is there anything wrong at home you want to talk about? You know I'm here to talk if you wanna talk to me." So they can talk.

Teacher as Friend

Mrs. Tracer seems to change her demeanor depending upon the context that she is in. Her approach to students in the lunchroom and on the playground resembles her style in the gymnasium. However, in the hallways and when "off duty" she relaxes considerably and shows students a friendlier, more playful side.

In the final vignette we accompany Mrs. Tracer during her lunch break. We witness the fun that she has with the students outside the gym, and the witty manner in which she responds to their congenial questions:

> In the lunchroom, the eighth grade class whom Mrs. Tracer had chastised during gym class the previous day are lining up for their lunch. As Mrs. Tracer collects her lunch from the counter one of the boys puts his arm around her and says, "Can you take me to the prom, Miss Tracer!" She laughs and says, "Boy, you too young for me!" Then a girl asks her, "Why you so small Miss Tracer?" Hearing this, Mrs. Tracer assumes a fighting pose and she and the girl engage in a ten second mock battle in the lunch room without actually making contact. The girl pretends to be frightened, her friends giggle, and the line quickly moves on.
>
> Thirty minutes later on the way to lunch duty Mrs. Tracer passes a group of seventh graders who are waiting in line outside their classroom. As she walks past

one girl says, "Hi Miss Tracer!" and then several girls immediately leave the line and walk along the hallway with her.

One of the girls puts her hands on Mrs. Tracer's shoulders and says, "Miss Tracer, I want to be in cheerleading!"

Another asks, "Is there cheerleading tryouts?" and Mrs. Tracer answers seriously, "Yes."

The girl asks, "Do I have to do the splits?"

"Yes!" Mrs. Tracer replies sternly.

The girl smiles and rolls her eyes upwards and they proceed down the hallway. By the time they reach the bathrooms eight girls have converged around her.

Mrs. Tracer asks a rather chubby girl, "You goin' to be in my cheerleading squad?"

"Yes," she replies.

Mrs. Tracer looks at her hips and brushing them says,

"Oh girl, what about those hips, girl!"

The girl blushes and the others burst into laughter. They know that cheerleading is a major commitment and involves regular practices before and after school, with Mrs. Tracer at her most serious. As they approach the school office Mrs. Tracer sees Miss Smith, their homeroom teacher, and says, "Miss Smith, they out of line!" The students rush back down the hallway to take up their positions in their line and Mrs. Tracer laughs loudly as she proceeds towards the gym.

Juanita, an eighth grade girl, refers to the different sides of Mrs. Tracer:

> When she a teacher in the gym she's kind of strict 'cause it's her classroom and she have to have it under control... When we come from the gym room she talk, she act like she isn't no teacher, she just acts like a normal person.

Robert, an eighth grade boy says,

> When she in the gym I can't go up to her and be sayin', "Hi Miss Tracer, how you doin'?" and be talkin' and laughin' with her. If I do that she be like, "You know it's too many kids in here." Then after school and I see her then we'll joke.

It appears that Mrs. Tracer's practice as teacher is "normal" in the sense of her enacting her norms and values and reproducing the established patterns of daily school life as teacher, but also is not "normal" because she also draws on other values or ways of being

elsewhere. Mrs. Cooper, a sixth grade teacher, commenting on this feature of Mrs. Tracer, believes that students understand the different shades of her practice:

> She may have to be stern with them for a moment, but when she's gentle with them they enjoy that. So they can understand why she's being mean now, but [they know that] when they're alone or in a smaller group, she'll be totally different person. The tone, the inflection will be a lot more milder, and they understand that and they look forward to that.

Mary, an eighth grader says,

> Outside [the gym] she is everybody's friend, but inside it's for her to be the grown up and ya'all to be the kids... Outside the gym it's like she one of us, she think like us, and she feel like us. But when she get in the gym you have to respect her as an adult and as your teacher, as well as you do on the outside as a kid.

Juanita, an eighth grader, agrees saying,

> You can't hardly say nothin' to Miss Tracer when she's in the gym, and do not interrupt her while she's talkin' because she'll really get mad. Outside the gym Miss Tracer is nice, you can talk to her 'cause she will listen to your problems, she just like a mother that's there for you, you know. When she's not in the gym, she's as sweet as can be.

Although most students have gym class for only one period each week, Mrs. Tracer performs many additional duties roles at Fleming School, which enable her to see students almost on a daily basis. In addition to undertaking daily playground and lunchroom duties, she sponsors the cheerleaders, and organizes sock hops, talent shoes, and assemblies. In performing all these roles, Mrs. Tracer comes to know many students personally and through her roles, students can see her different sides. Students regard her as an interesting adult rather than just a teacher. Miss Gilmore, a first grade teacher says,

> I see her as being "the gym teacher," which is her title but also as the teacher that will take no nonsense, that is respected by the kids whether they are in gym or out of gym. And that she has the concern. It's not just [they say] "They're in my classroom now, in the gym room now, so therefore I am in charge of them. But once they leave the room, then I don't even worry about them until next time." I see it being carried

> throughout, and that the kids respect her for who she is, and that she's involved with the kids whether they're in the gym room, or walking the hallways or in the office or whatever.

A former student comments about Mrs. Tracer as her friend:

> She understands us good. [She's] the person you can go to and talk your problems to, ask for advice and she will tell you, just like you will go to a friend. (Elizabeth).

Conclusion

Having given you a taste of interviews and fieldnotes, I conclude by addressing the practical implications of this account. What makes Mrs. Tracer's gym a worthwhile place to be and why is her practice so valued? How can her practice inform and improve teacher education and professional practice in urban schools?

We have observed ways in which Mrs. Tracer manages to detect and make intense and deep connections with her students, including troubled, disaffected students who are having difficulties in aspects of their school and home lives. Her reputation as a caring teacher and as a friend contrasts strongly with the distance that is created between her and her students when she performs her role as disciplinarian, and one wonders whether, perhaps, this distance makes it possible for her to care. Although her practice appears to call to mind research findings on expectations of African-American teachers in working with urban children (King, 1993), it is obvious that Mrs. Tracer is more than a walking stereotype, because many teachers in identical settings do not do what she does. In this sense, Mrs. Tracer, her students, and the behaviors and views of others at Fleming School speak to all who teach and who aspire to teach, whether in depressed parts of inner-cities, more affluent suburbs, or rural America.

While this paper may have enabled us to better understand the details of Mrs. Tracer's successful relationships with her students, it may also have generated concerns about aspects of her practice. As Peshkin (1993) says, "To know what is problematic about a teacher, student, classroom, or school is to have learned something of value" (p. 26). In many respects Mrs. Tracer's practice would not be highly regarded by outside reviewers because it does not incorporate the best knowledge available of pedagogy, of subject matter, and how children learn. Almost on a daily basis she contradicts several of the tenets of effective teaching espoused in the research literature, the professional opinions passed on by textbooks, and the requirements for physical education established by external organizations (Cutforth, 1994). However, to focus on these deficiencies alone is to regard teaching as a technical activity with quick answers or recipes for complex problems, and to ignore the view that teaching is a practice with immense moral significance that requires continuous philosophic and practical reflection. While Mrs. Tracer's knowledge of pedagogy may be lacking, it would not be right to say that she has no knowledge, no plans, and no ideas because she has a fund of knowledge about the students with whom she is working and perhaps, more importantly, a commitment and a passion to help these children to be better people.

In contradiction to the prevailing academic ideology of effective teaching, at Fleming School teaching is not always a rational activity characterized by the application of solutions to identifiable problems; indeed uncertainty is an ubiquitous, permanent feature of life there. Mrs. Tracer's role as physical education teacher is considerably more than a set of technical requirements because she assumes a responsibility for her students' development which goes beyond that which is contained in prevailing notions of effective teaching. She takes

seriously her human responsibility to be a moral educator for the children in her care. Her influence as a physical education teacher is inextricably bound up with her personal character, and we may be challenged to consider the potential of teachers to be not just teachers of subject matter but also to be teachers capable of conveying to students an outlook on life which has real value in their immediate circumstances.

This paper has provided some working understandings which serve as guides to a moral interpretation of events. These understandings emerged to some extent from outside the gym but also from within it, and they require one to pay attention to what is present in the gym and school context rather than to what one thinks could or should be taking place (Cutforth, in press). In considering both the strengths and weaknesses of Mrs Tracer's program, perhaps one should be mindful of Lightfoot's (1983) assertion that goodness is a quality that is situationally determined and refers to the complexity of people, events, and situations unique to a particular school's context. Her practice and the practice of other urban teachers have considerable value both to those of us who work with urban children and the teachers who will teach them in the future.

The examination of school conditions and the entire social context of schooling is essential for teacher preparation (Weiner, 1993). In this paper, I have suggested that the community's positive perceptions of Mrs. Tracer's practice are derived from its consistency with the prevailing view of good teaching. Her lack of "technical" knowledge is not an issue to people in the school; indeed they may be largely unaware of the potential of physical education to achieve a number of educational goals when taught in schools with fewer constraining conditions. Rather, a fact of crucial importance in the place of physical

education at Fleming School is the person that occupies the role of teacher, and in particular the individual qualities through which Mrs. Tracer has obtained the personal and professional respect from children, parents, and colleagues.

Before researchers, teacher educators, and prospective teachers make judgments about "good" teaching they need to make reference to the context in which it takes place. Jackson (1986) defines cultural context as "... the awarenesses, presuppositions, expectations, and everything else that impinges upon the action or that contributes to its interpretation by the actors themselves and by outsiders as well" (p. 96). Mrs. Tracer's practice would not be judged as sophisticated when assessed against certain external standards. However, unlike pedagogical knowledge, the immense personal dimensions of her caring relationship with her students is not capable of being prescribed. Her practice is a way of being in relation which cannot be compressed into a formula or a set of specific behaviors. In this sense, she does possess knowledge that matters: she has an idea of what it is like to live in the Fleming community and is sensitive to the difficulties associated with growing up in the neighborhood, and to the needs of families and young people. Because she is caring and gives the students the time and attention, she provides something which has great value to them, and in the context of Fleming School her practice is considered as more than sound.

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